

JAPANESE AMERICAN
(E Pluribus Una)

Although I have oriental features, and a different cultural upbringing from yours, I am speaking to you today as a fellow-American. I was born and raised in California, and because I was of Japanese descent, I was one out of many who were a part of what has been described as the largest single compulsory evacuation in American history. To young people like you, the World War II, Pearl Harbor and its aftermath, must seem like history long past, something that you read about in books. But I find that very little is mentioned of this exodus in textbooks. Yet more is being published now on this very event that I have been asked to speak about. So there is an ~~an~~ awareness now of what happened to a minority group back in 1942.

The United States, as you well know, has attracted for decades people of many nationalities, and I am sure that among you yourselves there is a blend of European origins. The Pacific coast drew towards its shores Asiatic immigrants, just as the Atlantic coast received the immigrants from Europe, and the Japanese formed one of the last, and the smallest, of our immigrant groups. But the Japanese were not really welcome on the West coast; only tolerated because they replaced the laborers that had been lost after laws were passed to exclude the Chinese. This anti-oriental hostility was not new, and it became more intense as years passed.

The first generation Japanese were known as the Issei, and my parents were of this generation. Those of us born in this country are the Nisei, the second generation. My parents' background differed greatly from that of the families we knew. Many of the Japanese in our town were engaged in small businesses or farming, but my father did not come to this country as a laborer, but as a student. He had finished high school in Japan, but after his arrival in this country, he enrolled in high school again to learn the English language. And my mother came as a language teacher. They had become engaged in Japan, and they were married, ~~ten~~ years later, in California. And all nine of us children, of whom I am the oldest, in our family grew up in the central valley land of California.

We grew up in Sacramento, the capitol of the state, in a section of the city we called Nihonmachi, Japanese town, down towards the river. The atmosphere of this section was typically Japanese. In my mind I can still see the private homes with neat gardens; the boarding houses for the migrant farm laborers who followed the seasonal crops up and down the state at harvesting times; the Japanese drug stores where we could get imported patent medicines as well as legitimate prescriptions; hardware stores that stocked Japanese cutlery and bamboo utensils along with U.S.-made tools; the dry goods stores that carried Japanese cosmetics as well as American fabrics and notions; the fish markets where we could buy a variety of fresh sea food; Japanese restaurants where neighborhood families had an evening out; even a Hospital that was staffed entirely by Japanese professionals. Although the Japanese were in the majority in this area, clusters of other ethnic families also lived here - the Chinese, Blacks, Mexicans, and white residents of European ancestry.

living here. hotels and boarding houses and small stores became necessary, as well as a profitable business for the people who undertook these enterprises. And the Japanese community where I grew up resulted from such a beginning.

Imagine, if you will, a far western city, the capitol of the state of California, where a large section of the town towards the river was almost completely Japanese. In my mind I can see the boarding houses for migrant Japanese laborers who followed the crops at harvesting times up and down the state, the drug stores where one could get Japanese patent medicines and remedies as well as legitimate prescriptions; hardware stores that stocked Japanese cutlery and honing stones and bamboo utensils as well as U.S.-made tools; dry goods stores that carried Japanese cosmetics as well as American fabrics and lingerie; fresh fish markets, where one could buy striped bass or tuna for sashimi, to be thinly sliced and served raw for dinner; Japanese restaurants that attracted the Caucasian and Japanese clientele both; even a hospital that was staffed entirely by Japanese professionals, but the meat markets were owned by the Chinese. We had living in this part of the town not just the Japanese, though these were in the majority, but also the Chinese, the Mexicans, some Italians, and Negroes. Our home was always open to our friends of different nationalities, and they were welcomed graciously by Mother.

The Japanese language was heard every day on the streets, and we were taught to bow politely to our elders, whether we knew them by name or not. The varying dialects of the language told of regional origins in Japan. Many of our Japanese school friends came from families engaged in business or farming. My parents' background differed from theirs in that Mother had not been a picture-bride, but had known my Father through her brothers who had attended the same school with him in Japan. She came from an old established Samurai family, with an education unusual for women in those days, since she had finished normal school, which was the teachers' college of that age. And she had taught a while in Japan before coming to this country.

My Father did not come to the United States as a laborer, but as a student. He had finished high school in Japan, but in this country he started in high school all over again to learn English. It is especially interesting for me to remember that in Sacramento, the Sutter Junior High School I attended was once my Father's high school. He had studied English in Japan, and yet the language was difficult for him to master. I recall vividly that when I was in high school myself, I had to read Sir Walter Scott's Lady of the Lake, and Father picking it up to look at the title and his slight frown of distaste. I learned the reason for the frown later, when I saw his copy of the book. There interlinear translations of the narrative poem on each page in Japanese. And my Mother came to this country as a school teacher, and they were married in California (after an engagement of ten years!) in 1915. They both spoke and wrote extremely well the educated, literary Japanese language, and they expected us to always use the correct phrases and idioms.

What was it like to have been born in a family like mine, with the cultural background of my parents, in this country where standards of child rearing were more indulgent and less rigid? Well, at times, it was downright tough! It meant growing up an American by schooling and associations, but with an easily distinguishable oriental face, and having to conform to customs and traditions and modes of behavior that our parents considered proper. I recall an essay that one of my younger brothers, Joe, wrote about our Mother in high school. He described her warm, endearing qualities, but he ended his composition with the sentence, "But she is a hard woman!" His English teacher was so taken with his concluding remark that she came to visit Mother, the latter a little embarrassed when she found out why.

It might interest you to know that my sisters and I were given Japanese names - Toyo, Hisa, Mae and Masa, - but that all my brothers have American names. In fact, Father was so interested in American history that he named our twin brothers (whom we lost in their infancy) Benjamin and Franklin. And my youngest brother was named Lee after a historical personage whom Father admired greatly, Robert E. Lee. My other

brothers were named William, Roy, Howard and Joe. I was the oldest of the nine children, but my brother Bill, a year younger than I, was always considered the chonan, the eldest son and heir.

Japanese families have been described as being vertical in structure, with the father in a position of control and authority. And the traditional Japanese family was characterized by strong solidarity, mutual helpfulness, and a patriarchal structure. Family themes, usually well emphasized, included filial piety, respect for age, but hard work, duty, obligation, and responsibility were also stressed. And I was brought up on two words in particular, giri, moral obligation, and on, meaning duty and responsibility, and fulfilling these two, when one's own desires ran counter to them, caused difficulties sometimes. I suppose the younger generation might say the difference was caused by the "generation gap."

Certain factors modified this patriarchal structure, one being that the Nisei children understood the American culture better than their parents. The children were citizens by birth in this country, while the parents were aliens. In the Japanese community, the family functioned more as a unit. The family was considered to be more important than its individual members, who derived their positions inevitably from the position of the family. Conversely, the family profited from the success of its members and was damaged by their failures. Family techniques of social control were firm and effective. Desirable behavior was strongly reinforced, both within the family and by the community as a whole. The behavior of any Japanese was held to be a credit or blot upon all members of the Japanese community. Therefore, family standards of social behavior were reflected in and reinforced by the whole community.

It is not surprising that such a social system --intact family, prescribed roles, and a high degree of family and community reinforcement-- was successful in controlling the behavior of its members, who in turn was characterized by conformity and little social deviance. Desired behavior was, of course, not accomplished merely by exposing the children to correct models. Behavior was constantly rewarded, punished, reinforced, and reshaped by such parental techniques as emphasis on dependence, appeal to obligation, duty, and responsibility, the use of shame, guilt, and community gossip, and finally, emphasis on ethnic identity.

The catch-all technique for reinforcing desired behavior in the Japanese individual was an appeal to ethnic identity. Many Nisei say that this appeal was only resorted to when an Issei parent did not know what to say, and it took many forms -- "Japanese boys don't cry," or "Good Japanese do it this way," or "Good Japanese don't even think about things like that."

My gentle, courteous Mother must have sometimes despaired about teaching us certain ideals of behavior and manners, because she would at times, refer to us wryly as yabanjin -- her barbarians. An example I could point out in this respect happened one morning when I was in a hurry to leave for school. If I missed the first bus, I would miss the right transfer bus that would get me to the junior college in time for my eight o'clock class. So I gulped down my coffee and toast, picked up my pile of books and rushed through the hall, kicked the door open and was almost out, when I heard Mother call after me in firm, unshakable tones, "Will you please come here?" I answered, "Oh, Mom, I'll miss the bus." She simply repeated, "Will you please come here?" So I reluctantly walked back to her, and when I faced her, she looked me in the eye and said, "Now you may go, but when you reach the front door, open it with your hand, and before the door closes, catch it with the same hand so it will not slam." I missed the second bus, to be sure, but that was another correction of what she deemed unladylike behavior. Since she had great sense of humor, I am sure that she had reason to smile to herself that day.

Usually the evening before April Fool's Day, as we sat around the dinner table, she would warn us with a smile that one of us would be fooled the next day. The following day at dinner we would be congratulating ourselves that we had managed to get through April Fool's Day without having been fooled by Mother. Then Mother would lean

forward to one of us, and she might say, "Roy, remember that I asked you to run that errand for me this morning? ... April Fool!"

Growing up in a family like ours was also learning to make ourselves understood in a bilingual family. Mother spoke Japanese to us, with a smattering of English words, but she understood far more of our English and slang than she cared to admit. Father spoke English to us because of expediency, and if we had anything vital to relay to Mother, beyond the scope of our inadequate conversational Japanese, he would serve as interpreter and translate for us. It was sometimes convenient to have Mother go to the door to deal with a salesman. She would bow so politely and then say with much dignity, "No spik English." They would bow to each other and part in a friendly fashion -- while her offspring who would be in hiding, beyond the front door, would giggle and commend Mother afterwards with, "That was fine, Mom!"

Unlike the homes of our Japanese friends, ours held many books, as both our parents enjoyed reading. My Japanese school-mates thought it rather unusual that we had an English set of encyclopedia, the Harvard classics, dictionaries, children's collections of poetry and prose, novels and reference books. At Christmas, we generally received books and toys, but also games that we had to share with one another, but the books were our very own. Mother read widely in translation, and it was she from whom I heard the names of people like Nietzsche, Schopenhauer, Debussy, Chopin, Beethoven, Shakespeare and others. She amazed me one day by asking me, while I was still in junior high school, whether I had heard of Shakespeare's Hamlet, and of a certain speech of his that began, "To be or not to be." Then she proceeded to recite in Japanese, so beautifully, the entire soliloquy.

My Father read as much, both in English and Japanese, and he would often borrow books from our shelves to read in English. One summer he read Kathryn Forbes' Mama's Bank Account, and each evening he would give Mother a chapter by chapter rendering in Japanese. She thoroughly enjoyed the story. He then followed that by the Gilbreth book, Cheaper by the Dozen, and though she relished this narrative of a large family, the story came too close to reality for her.

My Father was always deferred to as the head of the family, but we children sensed that often Mother's judgment affected his decisions concerning us. In the Japanese culture the woman, or the mother, is self-effacing and humble before her husband, and my sister-in-law, Michiko, from Japan, in referring to my brother Bill in conversation with, speaks of him, not by name, but as shujin, the master of the house. But my Mother, despite her innate grace and conformity to Japanese tradition, was not always self-effacing. She could be bluntly logical, outspoken when she had to be, and not easily swayed by the arguments of her "barbarians", yet we always received a fair hearing to our grievances, but I must admit that we often called her "The Court of Last Appeal." She would then say, smiling, "Thas allri. . . Mama right." Yet tradition bound her on occasions, because one spring morning, when Father was busily transplanting her favorite flower beds from the backyard to the front of the house, she stood inside the front door watching him. I overheard her say to herself, "Oh, that impossible man!" So I said to her, "Why don't you go and tell him to leave the flowers in the back, Mom?" She demurred, "Oh, I couldn't." So I blithely volunteered, "You want me to go out and tell him things alone?" She looked, aghast, at me, "Oh, no, no, you mustn't."

While we were growing up, our parents observed various holidays, Japanese and American, for us, which were such special days as they can be to children. On Boys' Day, May 5th, Father would fly five large paper carps on a fishing pole, high up in our cherry tree, one for each of his sons. The carp, to the Japanese, represented courage and perseverance in the face of difficulties as the fish went upstream to spawn. And on Girls' Day, March 3rd, Mother would make an arrangement of dolls in Father's den, with the treasured Japanese dolls at the top of the step-like arrangement and our every-day dolls on the bottom. She would let us invite our girl friends, with their dolls, to tea and serve us dainty Japanese confections. We observed Thanksgiving Day with a turkey dinner, but I think that Christmas and New Year's Day

were the most anticipated holidays, Christmas because of its significance, and New Year's because of the one-a-year special Japanese foods and dishes and the exchange of gifts and visitors.

And speaking of traditional foods, at the family dinner table, all the family were present. With our family, although Japanese foods were served attractively by Mother, Father had an international palate, it seemed -- so we might have for dinner Italian spaghetti, or Spanish tripe, or Mexican tamales and tortillas, or Chinese chow mein, or even American hash. Yet these so-called foreign entrees were always served with steamed rice and Japanese pickles. Father was served first, then Mother, then my brothers in descending order of age, then my sisters and finally myself, since I was the one serving. This task fell to me as the oldest of the girls. In many Japanese families, little direct conversation went on between parents and children at the dinner table, but at ours, it was the one meal when we could be all together, and it was the liveliest. The evening meal was the occasion for a round-table discussion, with both Mother and Father participating actively in the talk. Incidentally, even though I was serving the rice, I was generally expected to finish eating at the same time as the others, and with five hungry brothers passing their rice bowls to me for refills (sometimes I think it was a game!), I had a time to keep up with them and my own dinner.

As years came and passed, we grew outwardly beyond the immediate family world, and our minds explored a more manifold existence, as time branched out into the surrounding influences of schools and teachers and friends of different races. Eventually, as the older of us reached college age, Mother and Father decided to move to Berkeley, probably because Father himself had attended the University of California decades before. There was no well-defined Japanese community in Berkeley, and since housing restrictions existed against non-whites, we rented a house many blocks away from the campus. Here we lived until Pearl Harbor and its consequences focused on us, and other Japanese in the states of Washington and Oregon and part of Arizona, as a separate ethnic group, the target of the anti-Japanese movement on the West Coast.

There are probably other aspects of my growing up that I am sure that I could point out to you that made my childhood different from yours, unique because of the combination of the Japanese and American. And I can appreciate now what my parents tried to hand down to us, as you yourselves reflect on what you received from, and through, your parents.